



MICHIGAN PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

A member Chapter of Paralyzed Veterans of America

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**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL HARRIS
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BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH POLICY

**CONCERNING
HOUSE BILL 4900/4901/4902**

MARCH 21, 2006

OUR MISSION

The mission of Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America is to enhance the lives of veterans with spinal cord injury or disease as well as all citizens with disabilities, by advocating for civil rights, assuring quality health care, supporting continued research and education, and encouraging independence and healthy living through various health, sports and recreational programs. MPVA shall continue striving to remain at the forefront of both veterans' benefits services and disability rights, while working toward a better quality of life for all American citizens.

Mr. Chairman, and fellow members of the Health Policy Committee, thank you for allowing me this opportunity to give testimony in support of legislation (HB 4900, HB 4901, HB 4902) that would remove statutory limits in Michigan on allowing state funds and institutions to perform ethical and science-based embryonic stem cell research; allow for the creation of stem cells through certain scientific procedures; and which retain and strengthen the ban on human reproductive cloning.

I'm Michael Harris, Deputy Executive Director for the Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America, or MPVA. Our members are honorably discharged veterans of the United States Armed Services who incurred spinal cord injury or disease that resulted in paralysis and requires them to use a wheelchair for mobility.

The issue we face today is not whether to move forward with embryonic stem cell research, but how. How do we ensure that all unnecessary barriers to the research and development of life- saving cures are removed? How do we establish parameters that provide ethical oversight of this most delicate issue? And how do we help as many people as possible as expediently as possible? Unfortunately, today these questions are being answered in the context of a policy that imprisons the potential of Michigan's leading scientists.

Spinal cord injuries are dramatic. In an instant, the victim is transformed from a fully functional, independent individual to one who suddenly lives with severe restrictions and perhaps, a lifelong dependency on others. Paralysis is a devastating experience for the affected individual and for family and friends as well. The number one psychological problem that comes with a spinal cord injury is the symbolic end of life as it was "supposed to be."

As Americans face the potential for unprecedented life expectancy we also see unprecedented medical advancements. It is now our responsibility to do everything possible to protect the quality of life of the present and future generations. A critical factor is our use of human embryonic stem cells. Stem cells have been called the body's "self repair kit." These cells have the demonstrated potential to cure conditions including Parkinson's Disease, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, heart disease, Alzheimer's, Lou Gehrig's Disease (ALS), even spinal cord injuries like my own.

That is why MPVA supports using stem cells derived from excess frozen embryos that otherwise would be discarded in order to save, extend and improve lives. Every year hundreds of thousands of couples experience the joy of childbirth through in-vitro fertilization, a process which necessarily creates more embryos than can be used. Under proper supervision, scientists should be allowed to take cells only from couples who freely consent to their use for research.

But why has the use of discarded embryos for research suddenly become such an issue? Is it more ethical for a couple to donate unused embryos that will never become human beings, or to let them be tossed away as garbage when they could help save thousands of lives? While we prolong the stem cell debate, millions suffer.

For those of us living with spinal cord injuries our pain, suffering and psychological trauma will continue until scientists have the financial resources and freedoms they need to find the right combination of therapies and cell transplants. A spinal cord injury can happen to anyone, anytime, anywhere. I know this better than most because I suffered a severe spinal trauma twenty years ago. It is common knowledge in the spinal cord community that a cure is not an "if" but a "when" and in my mind that "when" is now.

As an organization we understand that support for this research raises concerns among people of good will, each trying to do what's right based on their very personal religious and moral beliefs. I have not shied from that personal soul searching, nor has MPVA in its policy making. Nor should anyone.

It's my heartfelt view that embryonic stem cell research is truly life affirming. It is a direct outcome of a couple making a choice, without being coerced or compensated, to donate to research a fertilized egg not used for in-vitro fertilization. This precious egg would have otherwise been discarded -- or frozen forever.

Because of the great potential of stem cell research, donating un-used fertilized eggs is as much a life-giving choice as the decision a family makes to donate a child's healthy organs following a fatal automobile accident. It is the pinnacle of charity to give so totally, so freely, of one's self in order to give life to another.

MPVA urges members of the Health Policy Committee to open the door to research on all excess embryonic stem cells derived from in-vitro fertilization, and to do so with government oversight that ensures ethical research procedures.

There are a few moments in medical history when we can clearly identify a giant step forward in improving countless lives. We saw it with the discovery of antibiotics. In fact, until the discovery of penicillin, Americans with the injuries our members have suffered were lucky to live another eighteen months after their catastrophic spinal cord injury.

Mr. Chairman, MPVA believes that embryonic stem cell research is another of these great moments. Today this committee has an historic opportunity to make a difference in the quality of the lives of paralyzed veterans by overturning Michigan's ban on embryonic stem cell research so that researchers can move forward to pursue scientific investigation freely.

Perhaps one day Michigan's paralyzed veterans will walk into your office to thank you in person.

Thanks you, Mr. Chairman for allowing MPVA to testify today before your committee. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them at this time.

POLLS SHOW STRONG SUPPORT FOR STEM CELL RESEARCH

HARRIS POLL:

AMERICANS SUPPORT THE USE OF STEM CELLS TAKEN FROM EXCESS EMBRYOS BY MORE THAN A 6-TO-1 MARGIN. (AUGUST 2004)

A Harris poll taken in August 2004 found that 73 percent of Americans believe stem cell research should be allowed, while only 11 percent oppose it. Support for stem cell research increased markedly since a similar poll, taken in 2001, found that 61 percent supported it while 21 percent opposed it.¹

WALL STREET JOURNAL / NBC NEWS POLL:

MOST AMERICANS FAVOR EMBRYONIC STEM CELL RESEARCH. (JUNE 2004)

A *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll found that 71 percent of Americans are in favor of embryonic stem cell research, compared with only 22 percent who oppose it.²

OTHER POLLS:

AMERICANS INCREASE SUPPORT FOR STEM CELL RESEARCH AND NUCLEAR TRANSFER AS THEY LEARN DETAILS ABOUT THE RESEARCH. (MARCH 2005)

A poll commissioned by the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research (CAMR) showed that Americans' support for embryonic stem cell research and nuclear transfer grew when they were given detailed information about the research. After hearing a brief description, support among Americans for embryonic stem cell research increased from 59 percent to 68 percent. Similarly, after hearing a more detailed description of what therapeutic cloning research involves, respondents' support for the research rose from 60 percent to 72 percent.³

EVEN VOTERS WHO SUPPORTED BUSH IN THE 2004 ELECTION SAY CURRENT POLICY ON EMBRYONIC STEM CELL RESEARCH SHOULD BE EXPANDED. (NOVEMBER 2004)

In a national survey of 800 self-identified Bush voters in mid-November 2004, a 55 percent majority agreed that the policy should be broadened, compared with only 38 percent who felt the policy should remain the same.⁴

OVERALL, AMERICANS FAVOR A CHANGE IN THE CURRENT POLICY ON STEM CELL RESEARCH BY MORE THAN A 3-1 MARGIN. (JUNE 2004)

By a margin of 74 percent to 21 percent, Americans (including 79 percent of moderates and 62 percent of conservatives) said that they back former First Lady Nancy Reagan's call for more stem cell research flexibility.⁵

¹ <http://www.harrisinteractive.com>

² *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News Poll, June 2004

³ <http://www.camradvocacy.org>

⁴ <http://www.jdrf.org>

⁵ Survey conducted by Opinion Research Corporation (ORC) on behalf of the Results for America (RFA) project of the nonprofit and nonpartisan Civil Society Institute <http://www.resultsforamerica.org>



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